

# Celebrity journalism may contribute positively to consumer health behaviors: researchers

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Celebrity journalism is often considered to be without merit, discounted due to its sensational details and lack of news value. MU researchers now say that celebrity journalism may be an underappreciated way to communicate health messages. In a recent award-winning paper, Amanda Hinnant, assistant professor of magazine journalism in the University of Missouri School of Journalism, found some readers of celebrity health stories report that the stories have an impact on their own behavior and how they discuss health issues.

Amanda Hinnant, assistant professor of magazine journalism in the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

Hinnant, with co-author Elizabeth Hendrickson from the University of Tennessee, utilized focus groups that discussed various celebrity health news stories and how each story affected the participants. Previous research had indicated that after a person read a health news story, they would then seek out interpersonal advice from a friend or family member before deciding to change their [health behaviors](#). Hinnant says celebrity health stories could circumvent that step.

"Based on the discussion of participants, we observed that it is possible for celebrities to serve as surrogate interpersonal contacts for people," Hinnant said. "Therefore, it would be less likely for a consumer of celebrity media to check with a friend or family member before

changing a health behavior based on a mass-mediated message. The presence of a celebrity in a health story could serve as that interpersonal contact for the reader."

Hinnant says participants in her research demonstrated how they took celebrity health behaviors seriously, weighing the moral implications and mitigating circumstances of a celebrity's life before judging a health behavior. Her study also revealed how the readers are an active audience, one that considers context instead of just conduct. Hinnant believes a person may be more likely to respond to a celebrity health story if that person has past experience with the specific issue in question.

"A story about a celebrity's postpartum health behavior will likely elicit stronger reactions from consumers with children than from those without," Hinnant said. "Similarly, a story about a celebrity experiencing addiction may stimulate a stronger response from consumers who have witnessed a similar circumstance. In these cases, the health messages likely have different effects on experienced consumers than non-experienced consumers."

Hinnant believes celebrity health messages play an important role in society, in that for many celebrity media consumers, they are a catalyst for discussions about health information. She says her research indicates that reaction to health messages is often linked to a consumer's own experience with the communicated [health](#) behavior.

Hinnant's paper was presented at the The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication conference. Her paper won first place for the Best of Entertainment Studies Interest Group at the conference.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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